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Your Smile Will Give Us Happiness to The End of Our Days

**Aotemsu Jamir
Kohima, Nagaland**

27th February. Their retirement date. The guests found this coincidence terrifically convenient. Among the gifts, the couple was made to feel, through the afterparty talk, and due to the sheer splendour of the items, that the ones they should cherish fondest were the mounted deer head from the Ezungs, the Dzükou painting from the Jamirs, the grand piano from the Lyngdohs, and the Naga headhunter bust from the Awomis.

A cold look hovered from the wife's eyes. "Look at these. They look much, but don't mean much. You know what would mean the world to me?". Her husband served a blank stare in return. "All we've ever wanted all our lives was a little child."

When the dawn broke with its amber glow, and the kata¹ biscuits broke into their mugs, the lady from the orphanage rang the doorbell. The tiny waif radiated a warmth that seeped its way into the couple's wrinkling skins.

On one arm the mother held the child, and with the other, she directed the carpenter to erect a signboard on the archway of the nursery. On solid walnut wood hung the words drawn in white italics: *Your Smile Will Give Us Happiness to The End of Our Days*.

On the day chosen to be the child's third birthday, the mother had her dolled up in a pleated black-and-white pinafore. The child twirled round and round like a carousel gone awry, sending her mother and her into a dizzy.

On her fourth birthday, the decision was taken to enrol the child in school. From the centre of her gilded home, she went to the corner of the classroom. The father paid a visit to the principal. "Sort this out now," he said.

The following week, the child had her first fever dream. For four days and four nights, a deluge of red filled her eyes. The mother shrieked in agony, as if the blood had leaked from the dream onto her Sunday whites.

¹ (Nagamese.) A local variation of rusk.

The child was then whisked away for her first vacation. Mahouts, marshes, mongooses and mangoes were the sights. So mesmerized were the parents that they missed the girl, who had collapsed on a bed of maraca ginger. Swooning, the mother went into delirium.

Upon their return home, everyone had something to say about the child. The doctor assured there was nothing wrong with her. The pastor invoked the name of the Lord to heal her. Her Onü² remarked that the child had seen a lot, reminded the parents to give her time. The therapist wondered how the child felt about it. And the neighbour boy shouted that there was something wrong with her.

The girl wondered if something was wrong with her. She couldn't play outside anymore, she couldn't visit her Onü anymore, she couldn't go to school anymore. She wondered out loud if she had given all the happiness she could.

"What are you saying?" said the mother, now recovered. "You know we still love you, don't you?" The father chimed in, "Your mother is right, you know. We have loved you from the day you were brought to us."

The week after, the pika³ cha tasted funny; so funny that the old couple fell on the floor, and having drunk from life to their fill, they passed in peace.

27th September. Their funeral date. The mourners found this coincidence terrifically convenient too. Among the mourners, the child was made to feel, through their embraces, and due to the sheer eloquence of their eulogies, that the ones she should talk to were the Ezungs, the Jamirs, the Lyngdohs, and the Awomis.

After seven months, she asked them to take her to the cemetery, and give her time alone. They commended her precocity. On the deceased couple's black granite headstones appeared the words scribbled with white chalk: 'Your Smile Will Give Us Happiness to The End of Our Days.'

² (Ao language.) Paternal aunt.

³ (Nagamese.) Black tea.